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Queer Black Feminism:

The Pleasure Principle

Laura Alexandra Harris

Abstract

In this critical personal narrative Harris explores some of the gaps between conceptions of feminist thought and feminist practice. Harris focuses on an analysis of race, class, and desire divisions within feminist sexual politics. She suggests a queer black feminist theory and practice that calls into question naturalized identities and communities, and therefore what feminism and feminist practices might entail.

Keywords

queer; black; feminism; fem; pop-feminism

I

The title of my essay reflects my expectations: articulating a useful queer black feminist criticism located at the intersections of pop culture, intellectual culture, and cultures of race, class, and sexuality. In one bold line, I level the entangled terrain of pleasure and politics in feminist, black feminist, and queer theory by equating their triple signification with the direct value of Janet Jackson's pop-feminist pop song, '*You might think I'm crazy but I'm serious*', if for only a brief maniacal moment (*Control*, 1986). Even I know that the grammatical power of the colon does not extend that far, or provide an antidote to the too often silenced but fierce clash of class and race and sexuality the emergence of these critical theories represents. Instead, as I explore my own identifications, I will propose that queer black feminism can rupture the silences contained in the words and practices of these theories. It can create and re-create its own alliances of theories/practices that can begin to name, to loudly proclaim, what queer black female sexualities might entail. I suggest that it does so by explicitly foregrounding the sexual politics of racialized and classed sexuality as a feminist practice, and by interrogating the many interstices between feminism as an academic discourse and feminist bodies.

For instance, I want to acknowledge the ways in which my desires as a lesbian but fem, as being black but ‘light, bright, and damn near white’ (an old Louisiana saying) and as being a feminist but from a particular class and culture reconfigure the politics of reclaiming bodies and pleasure. I want to speak out loud about these complications and contradictions. But which category addresses which complication? Should I speak to the history of my blackness as a black feminist or as a queer, or do I identify with both because I am a lesbian of African-American descent? Often, black lesbian, and the way that description of myself troubles identity, are terms that inform each other best about my differences. Reducing queer to its bottom line – a position opposed to normative heterosexual regimes – seems to indicate that I am queer because I am a lesbian, black, and feminist. But am I only queer in relation to heteronormativity or perhaps also in the very categories with which I cast my opposition to it? Further, I want to consider how claiming this subjectivity does not simply inform my position with power relations and systems of oppression but enables me and provides me with agency. Already my equation dissembles as the terms are in dissonance, contradiction, complex difficulties with each other, with differing cultural spheres, and with Ms Jackson’s nasty do-me desires. Will what I write be queer, or black, or feminist at all?

I toyed with the possibility of ordering them differently – black queer feminist, black feminist queer, feminist black queer – of placing question marks between them, but concluded that I have chosen for this essay the best possible order. To me, the very grouping of these adjectives further heightens the tension found in the definition Hazel Carby advocates for black feminist criticism, ‘as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions’ (Carby, 1987: 15). Queer and black allow me to underscore that my relationship to feminism, the theories and practices that emerged as the ‘second wave’ in the 1970s and 1980s, is not in simple correlation with my gender but necessarily, sometimes desperately, formed from an angle that allows me to define my feminist identifications rather than have them defined for me. Queer and black allow me to bring the personal and the political together without having one circumscribe the other, to invoke a critical position towards prescriptive theories of oppression and activism, and to open up the possibility of productive insight into the emerging feminisms of this decade and their inherent power relations. In this critical personal narrative, the queer modifies and is modified by the black which then doubly modifies the feminism. I contend that as these multiple modifiers illuminate contradictions and problems they produce an axis where pleasure and politics and feminist bodies can compile their histories.

Clearly, in this last decade of the twentieth century, history has become particularly important for feminism.

Feminism, Lesbian Feminism, Women's Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Queer Theory seem to have reached a point in university discourse in the US in which they are the heated, exciting, and often conflicting topics of classroom, essay, and conference debate. At stake are issues of recognizing and theorizing difference, acquiring resources, visibility, representation, and ultimately institutional power: a power not to be taken lightly. A lot of the swirl revolves around the parameters of sexuality. Not surprising, considering the political necessity for each to put forth a theory of sexual practice. Black feminist theory is likewise in turmoil over its parameters, its institutional position, and grapples with the theorizing of sexuality. Revealingly, it only occasionally finds itself articulated in relation to the overdetermining queer and feminist paradigms. Most often, this articulation is found in specifically black organized conferences such as 'Black Nations/Queer Nations?' in April 1995 in New York. One of the many projects of this conference was to explore the ways in which queer and black modify each other's concept of nation. In this arena, black feminists played an important role in determining some of the issues at stake. But, the dominant academic exclusion of black feminism as 'other' discourse, not queer nor feminist, has a history both far-reaching and contemporary.

For instance, I think this erasure of black feminist theory is evidenced in Barbara Smith's 1977 positing of a black feminist lesbian criticism in 'Toward a black feminist criticism' three years prior to Adrienne Rich's 1980 articulation of a lesbian continuum critical approach in 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence'. Rich's model oddly makes no reference to Smith's essay though it reads as lesbian one of the same Toni Morrison novels, *Sula*. Instead, Rich refers briefly to earlier, perhaps in her view less sexually radical, black feminist writers to support her claims for a lesbian continuum. Is it because Smith's black feminist lesbian emphasis on the link between sexual and racial politics underscores the white privilege implicit in Rich's theoretical move to not read lesbian in relation to sexuality (Rich, 1980: 178)? In Smith's essay, lesbian is the site for an expression of black female sexuality and desire historically denied and oppressed. Further, Smith focuses on an erotic romanticism in reading *Sula* as a lesbian text that is directly linked to her theorizing of racialized constructions of sexuality that prevent black women from exploring their subjectivity (Smith, 1977: 166). In doing this, Smith's lesbian reading speaks loudly to Rich's theoretical silence about racialized sexuality: a silence imposed when Rich claims that black lesbian continuums are parallel to white lesbian continuums as if

they exist unaffected by the power relations between white and black female racial and sexual privilege (Rich, 1980: 198). This privileging, of course, being the very system of oppression Smith's black feminist lesbian approach is in large part intent upon unravelling. Similar to this historically feminist precedent much of the dominant critical theorizing of gay, lesbian, queer and feminist positions gestures towards difference but disregards many of the complexities that black feminist theory has already raised about differences.

In Evelyn Hammonds' 'Black (w)holes and the geometry of black female sexuality' (1994), she frames the continued dilemma by questioning whether the feminist shifts between lesbian and queer can dismantle the invisibility and silence that have enshrouded conceptions of black female sexuality. Rather than spend the inordinate amount of space required to take white feminist/queer theorists to task for their 'failure to articulate a conception of racialized sexuality', she analyses the ways in which the structure of this academic discourse, framed by historical institutions of racism, homophobia, and inequality, has compelled black feminist theory to enact its own silence and erasure about black female sexuality (Hammonds, 1994: 127). Hammonds argues that sexual invisibility as a necessary historical and political strategy for black women has contributed to black feminisms' hesitance to do much more than analyse the restrictions and oppressions of black female sexuality, as opposed to being empowered to explore the possibilities of agency and pleasure (Hammonds, 1994: 134). Testing Hammonds' claims about institutionally enforced black feminist reticence on the issue of sexuality, I imagine giving a paper on intraracial colour spectrums and butch-fem erotic dynamics. I would have a nervous breakdown worrying who would be in the audience and whether they would be intrigued or wondering what this has to do with scholarly criticism. Yet, with my girlfriends at the bar this is a topic we have often taken up. In this group of black/mixed race women, who have other jobs, interests, and activities than academia, we have expressed serious conflicts, joked loudly, always gossiped about, and even made righteous political claims about intraracial colour politics and desire. In doing so, we have discussed issues of dark-skinned black lesbian fems' continued exclusion from conceptions of womanhood by an always present misreading of the black lesbian body as automatically butch. These black fems express the contradictions of desire and frustration that come with claiming such an identity precisely due to the negative sexual definitions accorded black women's bodies as not feminine, as not woman, and as oversexed and aggressive. Further, we have explored where the pleasure exists for some of us in eroticizing a system of colour and gender domination that divides women of colour as it

uses the same old stigmas to oppress them. In comparison to this bar talk, not utopic by any means, Hammonds' assessment of how academic structures do reinscribe systems of silence is vital.

My reading of Hammonds' essay understands it as offering an opportunity for a specific black feminist theory, one that confronts the dangers and restrictions of racialized and classed sexualities by producing a black female sexuality resistant to capitulating to the prescriptiveness of such constructions. Hammonds writes:

Black feminist theorists must reclaim sexuality through the creation of a counternarrative that can reconstitute a present black female subjectivity and that includes an analysis of power relations between white and black women and among different groups of black women. In both cases I am arguing for the development of a complex, relational, but not necessarily analogous, conception of racialized sexualities.

(Hammonds, 1994: 131)

In this essay I explore the possibilities of the counternarrative that Hammonds calls for in her idea of a cultural criticism of sexuality, one that details alternative forms of power queer black female sexuality creates; one in which labels are not naturalized as identity – queer, black, lesbian, feminist – and therefore do not reinscribe silence but engender ‘speech, desire, and agency’ (Hammonds, 1994: 141). I would like to sort out some of the debates surrounding these trajectories, and I would like to do so in order to suggest a direction for the emerging generation of feminisms. This direction I call queer black feminism, a compilation of the experiences of liberation movements before it, a practice of alliances rather than community, a practice of reclamation and confrontation, and a practice of theorizing the already traversed boundaries of culture. I relinquish all commonly held notions of success in the pursuit of this venture.

At the same time that I articulate and analyse this already ongoing queer black feminist project I know I will be enveloping it in my own auto-biographical perspective. I know it will be particular. My purpose in doing so is to bring theory and practice together by writing my self into history, by writing myself a history, and by writing a queer black feminist subjectivity into practice. I announce this intention because, eager as I am to treat the personal, I am equally disturbed by the exhibitionist tendency of autobiography, of experience, to close off the possibility of intellectual exchange. How can we argue, disagree, and evaluate the personal without attacking the person? Although I want to challenge academic notions of personal versus critical, or rather disregard them, I am ridden with anxiety about placing my body and desires into the controversy. Further,

as a black feminist, I am afraid to air ‘dirty laundry’. I want to do the right thing. Believing as I do that this is a crucial dilemma for black feminism, I have chosen to locate it in a queer context in the hopes of refiguring the personal and the political.

Knowing the text of my history, I know that feminism as the sole dilemma for this body makes it far less readable. Instead, when sexuality and race and the always overlapping clarity and confusion of the connections are considered, feminist maps of gender are in need of other terrains. This then, I imagine, is ultimately my point: for feminism to survive, and conversely to survive feminism, a greedy and attentive cartography must be practised. I hope it is not my accomplishment to set up and attack a mythic feminism, a paranoia fuelling much of the current theoretical debates, but instead to uncover a few of the layers and complexities of identity and politics always already within feminist debate. In presenting a self, myself, the intent is to project a representation of what makes *queer* and *black* and *feminist* useful as a strategy.

Additionally, I want to write ‘camp’ feminism as a means of employing subjectivity and objectivity: certainly as a means of maintaining distance, but also to implicate my position as a queer black feminist. Perhaps it is my way of paying homage to and coming to terms with a feminism that has been difficult for me, be it second wave, black, or queer. If by virtue of this seemingly difficult feminism there is a gap, my intellectual pursuits have taught me to find gaps interesting, the location for exchange between boundaries, for resistance. Categories are intended to draw straight lines. Feminism has found out, perhaps the hard way, that this may be the only way to think about differences of sexuality and class. Not to mention race.

II

Commercial and popular feminisms of the 1970s – that is what I grew up on. For years I envisioned myself as a feminist and what exactly this entailed I am unsure, except I know it was about being sexy. I planned early on to be looking good and acting sassy for the revolution. Film and television told me all I needed to know about sex and the single girl. I recall Cher’s image of the vamp, the tramp, and the bit of a scamp with her bold clothing and divorce from symbiosis with her short partner. Books were a great if confusing resource: *The Fear of Flying* (1973) and *The Joy of Sex* (1972). Curiously, my best girlfriend and I put the logic of those astrological positions to the test. Coupled with female anatomy, hedonistic sexual values were radical. In the background Helen Reddy’s ‘I am woman’ inspires tears of triumph to wet my eyes

while something else is happening between legs during a behind the couch reading of Xaviera Hollander's testimonial *The Happy Hooker* (1970). Finally, a definitive personal narrative bearing witness to the entrepreneurial strength of the new American woman – a ballsy immigrant story too. Yes, my coming of age in the 1970s was about the sexual revolution, about career gal goals, and about watching my mother straddling the options of the decade while telling me mine – ‘marry rich, you can do anything after you get the money’.

(The mother has always been a core figure in feminist analysis.)

I often ask myself now where the *real* feminists were when I was growing up. I know they existed and had a politics and an organized movement, at least that is how it appears in going back and reading about it. Granted my family was what I not too affectionately label ‘po’miscegenated class’ and intellectual debates were not found in abundance at the dinner table. I try to remember if and when I ever spotted one of these feminists, a funky-looking jean-clad one like Gloria Steinem. I must have but somehow the image didn’t take. Why didn’t I become infatuated with her and emulate her as I did with so many other women? Instead, I bared my navel in worship of Cher. I bopped to Diana Ross’ tunes and watched her countless times in the film *Mahogany* (1975), where she was the beautiful good black girl gone bad but come back to good black woman. I grew up with Janet’s bad girl struggles to be a good girl on the late 1970s comedy-drama TV show about a black working-class family *Good Times* and, of course, now pay tribute to her attempts to express a nasty in-control diva attitude. It is my belief that Janet is only just beginning to work her diva attitude coupled with an Eartha Kitt sex-kitten style – she is lacking only the sharp claws and deeply satisfied ppprrrggrrwwlll. When I gather together all the knowledge I have today about the height and impact of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s I am dismayed at the perception that such a mass movement passed me by. Is it only because I was (am) an oppressed pop-culture junkie?

I *always* thought I was a feminist but the more education I manage to acquire the more inclined I am to believe that I must have been lingering in a pre-feminist purgatory all those years, particularly when I seem to have been stuck in a 1970s sexual liberation mode while coming to adulthood in the 1980s anti-porn generation. What then does it mean for a person to identify as a feminist when she does not possess an erudite knowledge of the feminist ‘canon’ of history, practice, and theory? I cannot begin to recount all the academic incidents in which professor feminists and comrade feminists have exclaimed to me ‘You didn’t know that? You don’t know who she is? You’re kidding!’ Clearly, part of the

search for the real feminists in my experience is a search for feminists of colour and feminists of dubious social status. But colour was not included in the general discussion as black feminists in the 1970s battled out this terrain that feminism did not always actively call its own. It has become clear in writing this essay that of paramount importance to queer black feminist practice is the project of redrawing the parameters of feminism as a history, practice, and theory. It would also rescue my academic and lesbian embarrassments.

(Who was Alec Dobkins anyway?)

Knowing this is by now a repetitive litany I still find it imperative to state: the brand of feminism that seems to have passed me by, that waxes disappointed in my ignorance, works mainly from the university, from a prescriptive white intellectual theory of gender, and from an already enlightened state of sexual oppression within patriarchy. One would have to know about and agree on the terms of oppression to enter that sphere. Access seems to have been a serious problem for feminist theory and practice, not just for me personally, but as evidenced by the subsequent challenges feminism faced in the 1970s and 1980s from women of colour and diverse classes and sexualities. I have begun to consider myself a fortunate young feminist. I circumvented the squabble through my cultural impoverishment. I know I am fortunate as a black feminist because this allowed me to believe that sexuality was the first order of the day. The media put out the back end of feminism, literally the feminist as a sexualized revolutionary. What I am suggesting is that this sexy back end provided more than just a pleasant diversion. This media-hyped feminist was perhaps epitomized by the big-breasted bra-burning Adrienne Barbeau, who played the daughter on the TV show *Maude*. A feminist was sexually rebellious if also straight and righteous. In this TV situation comedy, actress Bea Arthur as the mother, Maude, dominated the family life. One might argue that Maude herself was the better version of genderfuck on the show. I can only confess I found her domineering masculinity seductive and had a masturbatory fantasy or two about her and Adrienne's buch-fem mother-daughter duo.

(The confession is a core paradigm of feminist consciousness.)

Feminism was the equivalent of power, in turn the equivalent of sexual pleasure. After realizing the difficulties the three terms have encountered within feminist and specifically black feminist debate, I have learned to appreciate and come back to this youthful if not naive connection. I resist being educated out of my feminism. Rather than interpret my history as one devoid of feminism it seems more productive to ask what brand of feminism was at work in my experience? Who were my feminist

role models then? What lessons did they impart to me about being female and black? How can I understand the impact of a media-popularized female sexuality? Was it straight-up gender oppression and objectification, as perhaps the anti-porn feminists might argue? Did equating feminism with sexual prowess undermine it or can the pejorative images be reclaimed? Is this cultural background of the 1970s and 1980s mine to claim?

(Ain't I a feminist too?)

If I focus on feminism as the only category for consideration an ellipsis occurs: there were other identity aspects to work out. The type of pulp-pop commercialized images I adhered to were not just about feminist pleasure; instead, these images often scrambled boundaries by letting the wrong race and class identities meander across them. For instance, in claiming a commercial and popular feminism as my history I mentioned Cher as a strong recollection of a recognition of gender and sexuality as empowering. What I did not state overtly and what is encoded in Cher's image is her mixed-race body – a body that resonates for mine. There is a crucial facet to this coding: within the gossip-history of Cher's racial mix the imbrication of class with race is made obvious rather than belaboured as a complicated connection to be searched out. I recall that in interviews and songs Cher spoke about her mixed Anglo-Native American identification and poverty class background and that provided me with information and affirmation of how often one was inherent in the other. Moreover, this pop-image rumour model of racial mixing offers insight into the race-class nexus by enacting publicly that to be of mixed parentage could define one's class standing, while, if one was in a particular class (stardom), it could be ameliorated by class privilege. Class, and most certainly race, seem to have been two areas of difficulty for feminism to fill in and, when it did, it often essentialized how they were mediated by gender.

I think it is difficult to write about feminism and at the same time have the writing be about race. This is perhaps one of the most important concerns for a queer black feminist practice: to make the terrain of feminist sexual politics a discourse on race. In understanding this as a queer black feminist project it is important then to understand how different cultural images might work. Obviously I am relying on a theorizing of my memory of gossip rags. But if it is mistaken memory, then the fantasy stands in – the narrative I did create with Cher's image. Rather than question the veracity of memory-fantasy I would point to the lyrics of some of Cher's songs for verification of this reading of her body. Anyone remember her singing 'Half-breed'?

(Bad taste in music is a feminist must.)

Cher's pop-culture prowess along with her Anglo-Native American identification alongside her light complexion alongside her sexual exclamations provide one code for my feminist history. By bonding with her background I could then begin to imagine how I might conceive of my own. I might identify with Cher because of my light complexion, because of looking for insight into interracial and class connections, and because I like the worst kind of pop music and culture, but, like feminism, the media in the 1970s offer a veritable void when it comes to powerful sexy black female images: particularly, I think, for my class background of black females who were not familiar with some of the bold writing being done. There was Tina Turner with her throaty vocals. Some of us black women managed to imagine living as large as blaxploitation film heroines Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) or Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974), but even so they were not granted pop-culture icon status. It is difficult to remember how I conceived of myself; I try to remember how other black girls like my cousins conceived of themselves. I try to remember how we conceived of ourselves in relation to each other. I know we all did the necessary grappling with understanding what blackness meant to each of us as female but in different ways and through different means. Writing as a queer, as a feminist, is difficult for me because even though race can be added on it can't be because race is its own queer feminist category. Further, in the US system of black and white *race works queer*.

A queer black feminist practice requires marking race and class in relation to desire and reveals that the telling of desire must always be a text written about race and class no matter how encoded within gender oppression. It certainly requires a rethinking of pop-cultural representations of feminism, the functions they served for their audiences, and the challenges they presented to prescriptive notions of where feminist consciousness is located. In one sexually exploitative package Cher's race and class addressed baggage attached to certain differences central to determining how bodies are grouped in the US in a way that academic feminism struggled to capture. For instance, what different combinations of gender, race, and class mixtures are obtrusive to the delicate skeletons of spoils, plunder, and murder in the US's national closet? The answer is all of them but they are played out differently. Without disregarding its particular exploitations, Walt Disney has the romance of Pocahontas and that yucky white guy. Clearly this Pocahontas romance suffers its own devastating historical erasures, but even Disney cannot imagine an equivalent US romance between black and white. Slavery: it's the too nasty story of race whispered in exposé form about dead presidents and

public figures because it involves a most insidious form of rape, bondage, and perverse desire.

Further, I can be an academic feminist; I can be a black feminist; I can be a dyke feminist. But I can't be any of them really without first 'passing' the boundaries set up in each, without confronting the assumptions of each, without recombining the advantages and disadvantages of each, and without being a queer in each. This 'I' certainly is not the unique case of passing through feminisms. It is not solely specific to my being light and a fem; passing operates on a variety of levels, gendered, social class, ethnic, economic, educational, and it is embedded within a structure that seems to articulate difference but often contains and silences it. Apart from my puerile bad taste, what attraction to an image like Cher represents to me was the basis for thinking about constituting my difference in terms pleasurable and empowering. I would like to think that probably from the first revelations I had about her I realized that accessing feminist power entailed outing the closets of race and class first – but that is hard to claim sincerely. Only in looking back can I interpret my race and class as inextricable from my sexuality and feminist consciousness, and only in looking forward can I predict what a schizophrenic narrative it constructs.

III

Clichéd and retrograde as the admission is, my mother and her friends were certainly feminist influences surrounding me. They are the women that were of age in the 1970s, that were caught up in the ideologies and images and cultural revolutions. It was their lives that were available for revision, or unable to be revised. The memory of these women and their desires has a clarity and poignancy for me that no amount of feminist analysis can interpellate. All of them were what I like affectionately to call 'high priestesses' after a disparaging description of women in Joanna Russ' story 'When it changed' (1972). They were the high-heeled, painted, cleavaged, and perfumed images of women feminism wanted to wash off and liberate. And when these women refused a liberation that appeared to them as just another brand of repression – feminism rejected them. Maybe what feminists did not know is that these women made fun of them. My mom and these 'girls' would break out laughing, they would go out drinking, and they would chase down possible sexual exploits at the bowling rink together. They were going to have a little bit of fun before it was over. Claiming and naming her own desires, this was my mom's feminist revolution. And certainly in late 1970s feminist terms they were not part of the community. Whose community was it anyway? These straight, working-class, racially diverse women, mostly

divorced with kids, or stuck in bad marriages, or young and searching for desire, were far more concerned with finding pleasure than finding community. Pleasure they understood was what had been denied them, and whatever else they failed to grasp they understood that claiming pleasure was the currency of power.

In order to better understand my mother's desires, it will be useful to describe what a queer black feminism might look like in relation to a brief and admittedly general mapping out of some of the issues troubling to feminism. In the US, feminism, from an early radical stance that assessed gender as biologically constructed and therefore oppressive, seems to have become almost immediately a plurality of feminisms rather than a cohesive movement. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s feminism was characterized by a dispersal of political stances with lesbian feminists and cultural feminists overdetermining the debates on gender, sexuality, and practice. Although categorizing these complicated ideological groupings does disservice to their own plurality, as Alice Echols (1984) points out in her essay, 'The taming of the id: feminist sexual politics, 1968–83', these dominant feminisms tended to cancel out other sites of feminist practice or render them as anti-feminist. The critical objection facing mainstream (cultural) feminism and lesbian feminism is the analysis of it as white, middle-class, anti-sex, utopic, gender reactionary, and academic. Feminists from this period are often upset by the revisionist renderings of what they 'experienced' as a radical time. Evidence of this was abundant at the 1995 Modern Language Association convention in San Diego where feminism 'revisited' panels were the crowd-grabbers. The rhetoric ranged from claims about the 'repressed' memory of feminism to angry 'mother-feminists' who could not locate what those wayward feminist daughters were contributing to the cause.¹ Perhaps without negating feminist icons' own history and concerns we can call into question their paradigms. Without disbelieving their narratives of liberation perhaps we can assess how that practice of liberation was displaced in certain communities, across certain identities, and became a prescriptive legacy.

(What have you done for me lately?)

The overriding issue informing this feminist discussion is whether or not feminism was able to address issues of difference, primarily race. Feminists wanting to preserve a memory of feminism as one of anti-racism claim as examples women of colour writing, for instance, Audre Lorde. In fact, Judith Butler, in a lecture delivered at the University of California San Diego on 15 February 1995 entitled 'Against proper objects', treated this very aspect of feminism in relation to queer, and, I believe, made the

claim that feminism was not impaired in its focus on gender in relation to race unless we are now to discount writers like Lorde as feminists. Although this is a valid point, my position is that a slippage occurs in the power relations of feminism when we simply include all feminists regardless of some very serious divisions and power dynamics. There did emerge a dominant ideology of feminism against which women of colour or other diversity had to write. I would go even further and suggest that it is these writers who are also the inventors of queer feminism exactly because, as race was elided by gender, so were sexual politics and other conceptions of difference and oppression. In fact, I can readily name women of colour whom I have heard identify themselves as queer/black feminists: for instance, June Jordan, Gloria Anzaldua, Chrystos, Cherrie Moraga, and Jewelle Gomez; it is much harder for me to think of women of colour who identify as simply feminists. Feminism was inspired by the 1950s and 1960s US Civil Rights movement and, if that is acknowledged, feminism's growth out of race relations resituates its absence of race analysis as a dominant factor in need of correction, not as a history of a multicultural plurality of feminist practice in which all were equal participants.

Of importance to this particular essay, one of the commonalities between these models of feminism was an emphasis on desire as a political choice rather than a personal one. This seems to have occurred primarily due to lesbian recognition within mainstream feminism as a political choice over a sexual one. The praxis was emphasized by focusing on an alternative female culture, one with innate gender values, in which equality would be achieved by eliminating power, a 'masculine' construction. By the 1980s this praxis seems to have been exacerbated by its focus on sexual practice in relation to gender oppression, a focus which quite clearly erased class and race. For instance, straight working-class women like my mother understood getting fucked as one of the few moments of power and pleasure they could engage in. For them feminism was not about rejecting supposedly masculine values – they liked masculinity – instead, negotiating a relationship with it was essential to their empowerment. For black women, race mandated very complicated negotiations with masculinity. In an attempt to purge male identification, this brand of feminism failed to consider how pleasure might intersect and subvert the power dynamics of socially constructed gender or how racism functions. This becomes markedly apparent within lesbian feminism as butch-fem desire, a desire of gender polarity between lesbians came to be labelled an unacceptable and heterosexually imitative power dynamic. Not only did this once again recast gender as innate to anatomy but it lacked any regard for the divisions of race and class where this culture

often occurred. Women – a category already seriously divided by gender definitions and class and race and sexual preference.

The personal is political has been paramount to feminist analyses, as if it hasn't been for other types of political or intellectual analyses. Feminism did not invent 'the personal' but admitted it, worked it, and went on to canonize it as a litmus test. Personal choices of pleasure are political in so far as we are at liberty to make them. The parameters of what that personal pleasure entails are not an indication of intellectual savvy or political commitment. This remains for me the pivotal misconception of feminist thought. A queer black feminist agenda should make this distinction and in making it expand feminist practice until it is unrecognizable as such, not to erase it, but to enable its dispersal throughout an array of political, cultural, and intellectual alliances. To give credit its due, it is exactly the ability and future of feminism, and the premise of this essay in making claims for queer black feminism, that feminist history is strong enough to shore up emerging radical movements. bell hooks often seems to be making a related point in her writing. In her essay 'Feminism: a transformational politic' hooks states: 'Strategically, feminist movement [sic] should be a central component of all other liberation struggles because it challenges each of us to alter our person or personal engagement (either as victims or perpetrators or both) in a system of domination' (hooks, 1989: 43). Although her later utopic desire to replace power and domination with 'love' differs greatly from my perception of power as everywhere – especially in 'love' – hooks is making an insightful and radical claim about how and where feminism should be located in the future. Furthermore, hooks emphasizes a feminist practice that does not require literacy as a contingency of participation. This conception informs this entire essay. By disrupting the literal interpretation of classic feminisms' 'the personal is political', queer black feminism inverts that aspect of identity politics that attempts to institute an assimilationist agenda for all women under gender oppression.

I am genuinely concerned that the liberation 1970s feminists made for me should not be denied. Let me state clearly that this essay could obviously not be written without their struggles, triumphs, and failures. But just maybe while they were liberating they were simultaneously oppressing. Missionaries did it; at least we know feminists had the best of intentions. I'm too old to be the rebellious teenager in my mother's house. I do not want to argue over who remembers what right any more. Instead I want to record what feminism meant for me, to me, with the understanding that I do so because *I am grateful* it was there. I need to claim my feminist past for the future, not be told I never had one, and therefore feminism needs to be reconfigured to include that past and define that future.

Often, this entails recognizing women whose voices were not articulated through feminism or whose politics were not formed correctly according to feminism. Many of these women will not be so identifiable as feminists. Some of these women are people I have found through feminist education and counter-education like Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, Amber Hollibaugh, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Jewelle Gomez, and Barbara Smith: women who have been both discomfited and embraced within feminism. A combination of these women and others make up my closest feminist relatives; they are my historical precursors for queer black feminism.

IV

My grandmother taught me how to play jacks. This is a nostalgic memory my father reminds me about. I can recall only one time when I was playing jacks with her. My parents were having a horrific battle in the next room. Whatever it may have been about domestically, it was always about interracial strife and economic standing. In this case my grandmother was being deployed as part of the battle. My father likes to remember that she taught me to play jacks because he likes to see the similarities in us. My grandmother and I were/are both small, full-breasted women with sharp features, hooded eyes, and long-fingered hands slightly too large for our bodies. Our skin tones were different; my grandmother was reddish brown and I range from a pasty light yellowish complexion to a nicer olive depending on the weather. My grandmother sat there that day while they raged about her but really about everything else it meant to be an interracial couple in the US. They who had sent love letters to each other that I had snuck under the bed to read. Love letters about beautiful brown hands and monkey-bitten thighs. She never missed a beat in our jacks game that day, but I did. My grandmother taught me that day to play jacks without missing a beat, no matter what storm is raging on the horizon.

I think about the women on my father's side of the family. My aunts and cousins. The real aunts were all generations older than him and religious. They taught us children to sit up straight, say please and thank you, and wear our hair neat, if possible. The other aunts were really cousins but so much older that we called them aunts. Some of them were different, a little less constrained; apart from the church they belonged to social organizations. Except one aunt-cousin. She was unruly, brown, and beautiful. I do not know if she was an active black radical and black feminist but she seemed to know a lot. She worked hard each day, and had her up and down days so I think she was a black radical and feminist. She was considered a she-devil in the family because she did what she wanted: a

drinker, smoker, and cultivator of shady male lovers. I used to have to beg to go over to her house even though it was her five children with whom I attended school and did call cousin. She told us so many things the other generations of black women in my family were unable to.

On those rare moments when I had her to myself as we watched late-night television she spoke to me as adults often do to children who are not their own: honestly. She comforted me over my parents' raging, affirming that my mother's new opinions on race were a result of her disillusioned immigrant naïveté as a result of being married to my brown father in 1957 in the US, not a heartfelt sentiment. She revealed precious family gossip that I couldn't get anywhere else, and that helped me to understand some of the racial tensions in my family despite, or because of, the fact that it is a study in skin shades. For instance, after being in the US a short while my mother asked my grandmother what *race* my father's real father was. My grandmother found this inquiry so ill-mannered and intrusive that she dryly declared to my father, 'If it was white you had wanted, there's a half dozen black girls in the neighbourhood whiter than what you picked up but still black enough for me.' To which my mother responded, 'I'm not white, I'm Neapolitan.' Knowing how intrusive and stubbornly illogical my mother can be, I laugh about this incident. I also imagine that she, only recently familiarized with the rigidity of the American colour line, must have been thinking there was going to be some middle ground that was undiscovered – a mestiza model of race. Further, in this black family tree – as I suspect in others – paternity was not an issue of interest to anyone but an outsider. In her essay 'Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: an American grammarbook' (1987) Hortense Spillers has made the most astute historical analysis of this systematically enforced silence originating in slavery and its effect of deviating black female sexuality of any agency through constructions of immorality and voraciousness. This was what my aunt-cousin endured – and spent frustrated energies trying to push aside – angry condemnations. My mother had no concept of the relationship between colour and silence in the US and therefore secured her outsider status with this inquiry. From then on, my grandmother found her to be 'frayin' on her nerves and illin' to her stomach'.

I think about many of these complicated female bodies in my family: complicated in relation to each other through their own complicated desires and subjectivities. For me, queer black feminism should have a complicated history of bodies and desires; it has to be able to acknowledge these complications to further resist the shame and oppression some of these bodies are made to be silent about. At the infamous 'Scholar and Feminist IX' Barnard College Conference in 1982, where anti-

porn feminists and sex-radicals battled it out, it seems to me that this queer project was begun on one front and requires further consideration: that is, in terms of racialized and classed sexualities. In Gayle Rubin's essay, 'Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality' (1984), resulting from this conference, she argues that feminism cannot address sexuality because it is a theory of gender oppression and as such is limited in analytical scope and definition. In stating this, the trouble must also be stated about raced and classed sexualities, and from this we have a fundamental indication of class, race, and sexuality as intersecting discourses. Feminist bodies are sexually marked bodies and they need to be defined within their concerns as class and race marked bodies. Amber Hollibaugh's contribution, 'Desire for the future: radical hope in passion and pleasure', to the conference-inspired anthology, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1989), states the class problem within feminist analysis of sexuality succinctly:

I have always been more ashamed of having been a dancer in night clubs when I've talked about it in feminist circles than I ever felt in my hometown, working class community. There are many assumptions at work behind feminist expressions of surprise or horror: I must be stupid or I could have done something better than that; I must have been forced against my will or I was just too young to know better; I have prefeminist consciousness; I had a terrible family life; I must have hated it; I was trash and this proved it; and finally, wasn't I glad I'd been saved?

(Hollibaugh, 1984: 404)

Hollibaugh's statement suggests the implications of 'consciousness' on classed bodies and this can further illuminate racial complications within feminism that need disentangling.

So, with all these problems, why not toss feminism and be queer? In thinking about queer black feminism, and the intersection of feminism and queer, it should not be established that one supersedes the other. Queer owes a debt to feminist analysis, especially that of gender as a social category, a debt feminism can be remunerated for by taking advantage of queer sex radical politics of pleasure. A sexual politics that links to the notion of queer as a social theory in oppositional stance to and confrontational reappropriation of deeply held norms and discourse might enable feminism to regenerate its sexual politics, to toss aside its own normalizing silences. This feminist politics has too often been unable to plug the knowledge of gender or race or class oppression into an outlet of desire as power not fully explored. One cannot toss feminism for queer, they are inextricably bound together historically as social theories. Further, for me queer has been most expressively articulated through black feminist writers although they are not often accredited

with such analyses in those texts purporting to define or do queer studies. Nor perhaps do many black feminists feel at liberty to claim queerness in an atmosphere in which their status is already tenuous.

I suggest that, like other black feminist writers, black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, expressing this need for exploring the political power of desire early on in her essay, 'Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power' (1984), anticipated recent queer social theories. Certainly Barbara Smith's earlier work is crucial, and in her 'The dance of masks' (1992) Smith takes this use of the erotic even further as she writes her desires out in an inspiring narrative combination of fear and agency about the sexual power of her butch body and desires as she expresses them. In her essay, 'The myth and tradition of the black bulldagger' (1991), SDiane Bogus challenges negative images of black female sexuality by reclaiming the history of the black bulldagger as the site of an empowering mythology and legend about self-defined sexual agency. More recently, black feminist scholar Jackie Goldsby, in her essay 'Queen for 307 days: looking b(l)ack at Vanessa Williams and the sex wars' (1993), demonstrates the importance of understanding how black feminist theory queers queer and feminists' sex radical stance. Goldsby does so in a theoretical move analogous to my critical suggestions about the history of Rich's privileged silence about lesbian sexuality. Goldsby interrogates the sex radicals' sex war debates' historic proximity to and silence about Vanessa Williams, the first black Ms America beauty queen who was dethroned due to the exposé of lesbian porno photos. In Goldsby's analysis of Vanessa Williams' image she links a personal narrative with an incisive analysis of historically race-premised social and economic relations of black female sexuality, that of it as an owned commodity. Further, Goldsby points to the underlying assumption of the whiteness of lesbian sex culture to assess how both factors contribute to the silence around black female sexuality that the lack of lesbian feminist discourse on Ms Williams' public fall demonstrates. In these few examples, if queer is in opposition to normative discourse then it is already part of the terrain of black feminist critical practice. Further, black feminist destabilization of oppositional categories reinscribes and breaks the silence of what queer and feminist might mean as more than 'naturalized' identities.

For me, as an umbrella term queer has a gloss to it that can only be sharpened with feminist history: a history often grappling over and in contradiction with race and class and sexuality but with a saliency and experience of pushing bodies and politics against each other. Queer, as it is often claimed by academically powerful white masculinity, sometimes suggests and describes its political constituency as seductively fluid, unmarked, ambiguous, and chosen. This fluidity sounds dangerously like

the status of white masculinity to me. For instance, one could compare Michael Warner's notion of an individual practical self-reflective queerness in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) to the queerness articulated through complicated familial interrelations, experience, fantasy, social systems, and in contradictory connection to others that Thomas Allen Harris presents in his documentary film on queer black siblings 'Vintage: Families of Value' (1995). Furthermore, in what appears to me as a direct contrast to queers of colour, this same type of queer theory often calls for an analysis of class and race alongside sexuality without producing it. This predominant unfulfilled project is what queer black feminism is capturing. I contend that queer social theory is indebted to black feminism: that queer black feminism's anticipation of a praxis of sexuality and bodies, premised on its axis with a feminist history of fraught relations of class and race, articulates an analysis of sexual politics that could reconstitute the understanding of queerness altogether.

V

Pursuing pleasure has become central to my understanding of a queer black feminist model. The courage behind the pursuits I owe to exploitative sexual imagery no matter how convoluted and screwed up the analyses which were enacted. Feminism did not have models or access for me as a queered-out young woman feeling sexual, grappling with race and class status. Nor could feminism address women like my mother or aunt-cousin, women who liked to fuck men, who wanted a better life but did not want more rules about how to get it. Indeed, a queer black feminist analysis comes into play when I can re-evaluate my aunt-cousin's and mother's sexualities as differing but interlocked systems of race and class domination, ones in which white dominance differently pathologizes and penalizes their desires but does so by a dependence on constructing a pervasive and excessive perversity of blackness. This construction works against developing an analysis of black women's struggles for sexual agency while it locates degeneracy in the psyche of the female interracial violator. Instead of a persistent paralleling of black women's sexual oppression to that of Anglo or European women's as if that encompassed the extent of the systems, an understanding of the specific negative significance of blackness in relation to female sexuality offers one way of grasping how the repression of black female sexuality exceeds this reductive positing of sameness. Certainly, it is not the only way.

Looking for pleasure invites me to look at my mother's identity as a feminist in terms of her ethnicity, interracial violations, class, and sexuality.

Instead of negating her as anti-feminist because she participated in her own oppression, I can map out her brand of feminism as it worked for her. My mom didn't have access to complicated political analyses, or the time or training to acquire it. She was just angry about the structure. She was going to beat it – on that point she was determined. After her divorce in the 1970s my mom had a bit of a time to find employment since she had been housewifing it for sixteen years or so, had three kids to support, and a foreign high school degree. She finally landed what as a child I considered an excellent position: the sales clerk in the Kmart pet section. Kmart, that large department store where inexpensive 'brand' name clothing and greasy french fries could be purchased under the same roof. Unfortunately it paid little and she had to keep looking for a second job. In the meantime she had had to go to the welfare offices to ask for AFDC: the US financial social service of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. It was destined to be a disaster as all experiences with American bureaucracy were for her. I recall her retelling the indignities in her heavily accented, high-pitched fast voice to her then good friend and co-Kmart worker F (simultaneously she was cutting years off F's face while cutting bangs in her hair). Apparently, when all documents were produced, the social worker had instructed my mom to correct an item in the paperwork before processing: the children's father was black therefore the children were black. That worker seeking accuracy above all probably never knew what hit her, but she had certainly struck at one of my mom's sore spots with the US. 'My children are not black I told the bitch and threw the papers back in her face! In European families, in my family, we have grandparents from Ethiopia, from Spain. We say we are Italian, we do not say we are black! This, this is the hypocrisy of this damned United States. Who is a goddamned American anyway, show me their faces.'

(Check one box only: facism or racism.)

It seems a couple of weeks later that my mom had learned of a women's meeting that was convening locally. It promised support and action. From my perspective now I assume it was a placid apolitical version of a female consciousness raising group, middle-class suburban style and, knowing that, I realized the pain that must have cut through my mom's optimism when she told her recent story and asked for action – now. No one understood her anger, they probably had no paradigms for thinking of gender in relation to class or race and, worse, I feel certain they found her display of illogical frustration, loud desire for revenge, and even perhaps her interracial ties appalling. Obviously the social worker was correct, why was this woman upset? Obviously to me, my mother was irrational and racist in the target of her anger. But what has

become even clearer is that in my mother's racist attempts to insist on her children as not-black she had made an astute correlation between the overlap of black and class in the US, an observation that mainstream feminism's insistence on gender oppression was ignoring. For my mother white status implied privileged class status in the US, and black status was dominated class status, and having access to class privilege was to participate in power and pleasure. My mother may not have been able to put this into abstract enunciation, rather, without defining it, attempting to 'pass' her children was her retaliation.

One of the difficulties in writing this essay has been to resist a tendency to write separate stories about conflicting intersections: to write about the influence of my mom's class-marked pursuit for pleasure as queer material for refiguring feminist practice and, second, to write out the strife over my racial identification within my relationship to my mother as I actually claim her as a feminist model. The oddity is that this seems parallel to the story of feminism and women of colour. Although gender provided them with some common ground, race created vast divisions. Audre Lorde's essay 'An open letter to Mary Daly' (1981) exemplifies this fracture as Lorde takes Daly to task for her racial assumptions and erasures. Actually this comparison belies a slight difference. While feminism denied overt racism, my mother practised at times just that. Without retracting that last statement in the least, I know it was not a sustained racism; I know it came in angry bouts; I know it was a US-induced racism; and I know it was juxtaposed against a predilection for dark bodies.

It is the nature of the beast that my mother could compliment my brother's brown skin for being just that – a lovely colour – and still spout epitaphs of slicing desire to annihilate the black in us. Yet my father was by no means the last black or male of colour with whom my mother was sexually involved. How is the predilection involved in the angry disavowal? Was my mother a woman who cannot claim her desires because they are entangled in taboos that make her a nasty girl in social exchanges? Did this nastiness titillate her to further fulfil the taboo-crossing desire and simultaneously fill her with shame? What I am suggesting is a particular component of my mom's racism that is about her gendered relations to race as an interracial interloper, but also an indication of how desire, gender, class, and race are pitted together. If it is understood that desire itself might be fuelled by shame over ourselves, over our own desires, then perhaps the question is not how do we overcome this shame/desire but it should be how do we address this shameful desire and make it empowering, resistant, a political stance? Beyond analysing the social relations and history that produces this shame and

desire, how does queer black feminist practice necessitate reclaiming our history of shameful desires? Feminism made some attempt at deconstructing shame and the female body in a variety of configurations, obviously by making sex a topic of discussion. But it became evident in the 1980s when the sex wars were ensuring that feminism had never moved beyond a narrow perception of sexuality or race and class in relation to gendered shame.

Since I am analysing my mother's desires, a task I find troubling (exactly because I've got a Toni Cade Bambara fear of her coming into my room in the middle of the night essay in hand), I should reflect on my own history of desire in relation to my racial history: my own history of shameful desires. It would help to begin with childhood. One of the games when playing with my cousins and friends was a game about master/slave relations. On more than one occasion my aunt-cousin was sitting in the living room in a heated debate with friends about Black US Slave History and we kids, being an annoyance, were excluded to the basement or yard and took up the conversation for our own use. We were well-informed for our roles. Being light I was the house slave, the one who got to dress pretty and eat well but who would also be forced to sleep with the master of the house, until she was rescued both emotionally and physically by another female slave, her unknown till then blacker sister and illegitimate daughter of an evil owner. The drama heightened as they faced punishment but together they would either run away or kill everyone. If that sounds elaborate, I can assure the reader we had lots of variations, and despite that we were usually all girls we had plenty of gender-role playing going on. Keeping the sanctity of the playground rule 'not to tell' I'll refrain from further details, and instead point out that what I am trying to make visible is an identification of desire and gender that came through my racial identification.

The queerness of being black but light, the shame of being light but black, the gendered mediation of the two, and the acted-out fantasies of the history of power relations embedded in the formation of these categories bears resonance on my adult desires. Now certainly I am not trying to claim that all my desires have been clearly in place thanks to childhood games. More to the point I am trying to claim that interacting with one's history, with the desire, shame, and responsibilities embedded in that history, enforced through that history, should be a part of arriving at an understanding of the power of desire. It should enable a queer black feminist reclamation of that desire, a resistance to that shame. I have to comprehend, accept, and speak out about the certain position of advantage and disadvantage I have in the structures of oppression. I need to turn the shame of that position around and make use out of

what it puts in my imagination to arrive at any sexual agency. Related to my experience of expressing myself to others as black is the more complicated experience of outing myself as a fem, an identity that denotes certain sexual desires, but doing one is embedded in doing the other. The necessity of my always having to say I am black to be identified as black marks my light appearance as both a privileged and silenced history of power relations and shame around interracial sexuality in the US. This has parallel roots in my always having to come out as fem to be identified as lesbian and then as a particular type of lesbian, one invested in an overtly gendered erotic relationship. Along with my fem investment in eroticizing lesbian differences I am often mistaken for straight, another history and set of power relations in this society. Concurrently, claiming my fem desires has given me access to my body, a light body that as black-identified I often am alienated from, by allowing me to find ways to take pleasure in it despite its racial and sexual perversities. This queer sexuality of mine then is engendered by and engenders my queer racial identity. This puts my history at my service, this places my race as central to my gender and desire, and this places my sexual fantasies to my advantage. In those devastating moments when feminists defined practice as an elimination of all power-tainted sexual fantasies their own ‘overt’ racial bias is most certainly established as they shape practice on white middle-class empowerment – not to mention, prescribe a sexual practice as oppressive and boring as it gets.

It is this necessity for continually coming out of closets of knowledge that I suggest queer black feminism should embrace and I believe is already moving towards. Once a system of knowledge is in place, once gender oppression is under scrutiny, the focus should include not only disrupting the stability of the category but finding methods of making one category always a discussion of another. It just doesn’t prove enough to add the themes – here’s race, a bit of class, and a touch of sexuality – without allowing them to disrupt the system in ways that reconstitute it. A dialogue on race is a feminist dialogue is a class dialogue is a queer dialogue already. Categories are queer. By this I do not mean that categories are useless, obviously not when they are already in place as a complex network of social meanings and bodies of knowledge. It has taken me a long time to come to understand my mother’s identity in the above terms, and thereby start taking a closer look at my own. In telling this story it is not an accomplishment for me to bash feminism. The accomplishment in telling this story resides in the acknowledgement that at the place where theories and identities converge to form practice categories fall apart and practice can no longer be prescribed. Feminists of the 1970s may feel anger towards the revisionism occurring but they also

need to move beyond their own experience. With their anger I can both empathize and disagree.

(Balance and equality are core feminist values.)

VI

In order to better illustrate the complexities involved in concepts of community, identity, and politics at stake in a queer black feminist agenda I want to turn to a recent publication of journalism and essays by Sarah Schulman entitled *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years* (1994). This text is not a comprehensive history by any means, and in fact contains writings done mostly between 1981 and 1994, but, as I stated earlier, history has become important for feminism in the 1990s and this is one such recent history. I chose this particular text over other recent contributions because it is experiential and already in an odd relation to feminism with its queer trajectory and therefore provides a complicated feminist identification. What the text offers this essay is the perspective of a germinal lesbian feminist political activist involved with queer activism, Sarah Schulman, and as such presents an insider's view on how movements define themselves and their communities.

To start off Schulman addresses feminist revisionism with a competitive challenge to 1990s dykes over who is/was more sexually daring:

And this line was backed up by an amazingly distorted revisionism on seventies feminists and lesbians claiming that *they* were sexually inhibited and prudish, when all the documentation from that period points in the opposite direction. . . . In the end, I still don't believe that the nineties dyke enjoys sex more than Catherine MacKinnon.

(Schulman, 1994: 9)

Well, we all have to have our 'beliefs'. I believe Schulman when she claims that sexual experimentation was laid open by feminists and lesbians in the 1970s. What I wonder about is how straight working-class women like my mom or black women like my aunts were supposed to get their rocks off and still be admitted to feminism as more than an object for reform. What I wonder about is whether feminist and lesbian sexual experimentation made room for diversity or defined this experimental sex rather narrowly and prescriptively; if it thought about race and class models for sexuality. I want to argue from my own understandings of cultural feminism, lesbian feminism, academic feminism, and popular feminism that it seems that sexuality was usually either heterosexually defined or politically defined and therefore narrowly defined by

all camps in the feminist debate. It is not about who is ‘badder’, it is about how to create a politics that allows for a claiming of one’s own pleasure. Isn’t it?

Schulman’s book offers a reflection on how feminist communities worked in the past and how they might or might not work now. It admirably reveals the complexities that occur with bodies and categories and boundaries. For instance, Schulman gives a well-deserved and righteous slap on the hand to Susan Faludi’s recent book about backlash, a very real issue for the 1990s, by asking why five hundred pages and no mention of dykes? Always straight feminists and lesbians had trouble getting together. Until of course they could align around gender values, make sex political, and oppress all other sexual paradigms. Whose utopia is it anyway? In another breath Schulman defines core gay and lesbian issues and lesbians in the military as not one of them: ‘Not only is there great dissension within our community about the role of the military (which has made grass-roots organizing on the issue difficult and low key), but it seems clear that the community’s own priority is AIDS’ (Schulman, 1994: 14). Granted, this may have been an issue sent from the political top down but black lesbians often join the military as an economic necessity and, as Schulman herself acknowledges, are the first booted out on homosexual charges (while others have charges dismissed).² This certainly speaks to the specific sexual stigmas attached to the black female body. If the community’s own priority is AIDS, one might ask, as Evelyn Hammonds does, how the gains made by queer activists around AIDS have disrupted the stigmas attached to black women’s sexuality and AIDS in the African-American community. Schulman, who makes up your activist lesbian feminist community? And how do you go about analysing the most pressing concerns – does the community dialogue on race incorporate class at all? Granted Schulman presents a diverse and impressive array of analyses around race and class, particularly with her inclusion of a narrative about Jewish working-class women and journalistic excerpts recording the contributions of black feminists among other people of colour. But in her introduction Schulman critiques identity politics and ethnicity divisions as entering feminist activism and de-activating it (Schulman, 1994: 4). Class and race and sexuality and gender and feminism, what a dilemma for the 1990s. Why can’t we all just work together?

Schulman’s recent text intersects feminism with other agendas expertly and, intentionally or not, articulates the complexities feminist agendas have inherited today. It is clear to me that pleasure is central to all the debates. Schulman’s participation in the organization of a new method of lesbian activism, the Lesbian Avengers, illustrates her own feminist

understanding of pleasure's relationship to politics. The handbook uses sexy images and slogans once seen as exploitation for political fliers. On one flier Pam Grier of blaxploitation film fame appears with artillery and hot pants luring members to a fund-raising party. Direct and confrontational political actions known as 'zaps' are detailed. The Lesbian Avengers methodology seems to be capable of attacking a varied line-up of political concerns, and seems to be able to make it appealing to a larger constituency by extracting political involvement from prescriptive sexual politics. Where can the types of feminist and sexual politics links that Schulman presents with her avenger model, where there is not an explicit analysis of race or class, be further defined? I suggest that queer black feminist understandings of pleasure and politics are 'id' for feminist agendas.

What are the purposes in this queer black feminism being claimed out of creating a sexual politics of pleasure? Abstractly, the answer is a cultural analysis and reclamation of queer black female sexualities: sexualities that have had a long history of being denied pleasure. But this queer black feminism may seem to be consumed by sexuality while other issues are laid by the wayside. What about equality of wages, opportunity, and rights? I will risk arguing that the feminization of poverty is an issue of the right of women to define their own pleasure as much as it is an issue of wage earnings precisely because it is the same body being subjected to service and circumspection, because one type of oppression inheres the other. When public discourse and legal legislation define single black mothers receiving public aid as sexually immoral and irresponsible in order to enforce the use of birth control technology and even sterilization as a condition of their public aid, then sexual agency is clearly at stake. Queer black feminism can best be understood to take up sexuality in ways that make it simultaneously about race, class, and gender – in ways that politicize pleasure – not just personalize it as a politics of being. The constituency for queer black feminism may alter daily, may be organized differently around class or race, and may carry agendas from welfare activism to academic cultural analysis. It should exhibit the methods for a changing agenda by changing the concept of the feminist body and its pleasure and its history.

Queer black feminism's attention to pleasure will not be viable for all feminist agendas. But queer black feminism understands pleasure and sexuality as bodies seeking rights and wages in a way earlier feminism was unable to do: in a way that does not require a conformity to 'ideal' models of gender and pleasure in order to demand political rights. Queer black feminism does not extract one type of identity from the other by containing and silencing markers of identity within boundaries

of gender. The category of woman has been sexualized precisely by markings of class and race, and inner-circle feminist oppression has occurred precisely by attempting to eliminate these markings with gender. Hence, straight women who understand the liberty to fuck as emancipation might have found feminism more accessible if their desires had been recognized. Black lesbians might have found it more accessible if raced and classed constructions of sexuality had informed the theories. Since this resulted in an area of contention for mainstream feminisms, queer black feminisms can now take the opportunity of historically locating, analysing, and redrawing the bodies at stake.

In conclusion, I want to reflect upon the writing of this essay. I want to draw upon a facet revealed in the personal aspect of this essay that is apparent in arriving at the end. I find it illustrative of the dynamics of the complexity of identity that, although my queer black feminist agenda calls upon a combination of pop culture and intellectual arenas, it relies even more on being grounded by the interrelated and different experiences of both black and white straight working-class women grappling with oppressions – women who have a complex set of ethnic and racial and gendered circumstances. The agency, pleasure, vocality, and particularity of struggle denied these subjects inform this essay. Is this a problem or a solution? Perhaps the grouping of queer and black and feminism resides in just such a contradictory and tentative alliance. Perhaps the possibility of such an alliance and diversity of queer black feminists is conditional. Queer black feminism recognizes this; already its subjectivities are creating theories/practices/alliances with which to work.

Notes

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1 It was Teresa De Lauretis and Florence Howe, respectively, who proposed these dilemmas.

2 Alicia Harris, my cousin, was part of a group of women brought up on homosexual charges in the 1980s in the Navy in which only the black women were discharged. It was a fairly publicized event with much media distortion and (mis)representation.

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